Office of the President

"You Are No Longer in Isolation" Baccalaureate, Class of 2023

Middlebury graduates: As I look at all that you have done since you began here, there is no doubt in my mind that you are fully prepared to take on the world. You are the remarkable Class of 2023, who together and as individuals have managed to take on more in the last four years—in often unimaginable circumstances—than what many people take on in a lifetime.

Let me offer you some numbers as evidence:

Among you are multiple recipients of nationally competitive fellowships, including recipients of the Critical Language Scholarship, the Davis Projects for Peace grant, Fulbright Study/Research and English Teaching Assistantship, the Gates-Cambridge Scholarship, the National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship, the Goldwater Fellowship, the Gaither Junior Fellowship, and the Watson Fellowship.

Fifteen of you are senior peer writing tutors, many of whom have worked at the Writing Center for three or more years, and several of you created programming within the Writing Center, including student-faculty writing workshops and wellness events–mentoring your younger colleagues, conducting research, running programs, and making the Writing Center a more inclusive and engaging space.

Among you are varsity athletes who have been a part of 13 NESCAC championship teams, and six NCAA championship teams. Eleven of you are All Americans; two of you are CoSIDA Academic All-Americans. Four of you are NESCAC Player of the Year, and one is a NESCAC Individual Champion—and two of you are Olympians. Many others of you participated in club

sports from crew to rugby to Ultimate to water polo, perhaps with less recognition, but with no less passion and pride.

You were academically or professionally engaged with the Middlebury College Museum of Art as interns, receptionists, museum ambassadors, MuseumWorks interns, and representatives to the Committee on Art in Public Places. Nine of you completed Privilege and Poverty summer internships.

Then there is what you accomplished as individuals and in small groups.

Through Language in Motion, you developed and delivered programming, remotely and in-person, to support global awareness, curiosity, and intercultural competence, in scores of schoolchildren in Vermont, Kenya, and India.

You cofounded the Middlebury College 4-H Club and created Midd Helping Hands. Two of you coordinated more than 180 Community Friends mentor matches. You have rebuilt the DREAM program, the College Access Mentors program, and the MiddVolunteers program during the pandemic. You have mentored dozens of students to become leaders in the migrant justice movement at Middlebury. You led voter registration drives and propelled our nonpartisan democratic engagement efforts. You helped make youth mentoring more gender inclusive through Sib2Sib.

You presented your choreography at the American College Dance Association and explored the anthropology of dance in Ireland. You dedicated a year of your college career to celebrating the Knoll's 20thanniversary. You hosted Silent Disco dance parties and produced documentaries connecting Addison County and Mexico.

And you challenged us—to confront systemic racism more directly in our country and on our campus; to increase campus diversity and equal access to the full Middlebury experience; to broaden our understanding of accessibility and gender identification and inclusivity; and acknowledge the original inhabitants of the land where campus now sits.

Put one way, you are the class who saw the entire span of the COVID-19 pandemic. You had one bright first semester. Then you had lockdown and two and a half years of COVID life—rules and regulations circumscribing your contact with others. Then a year of something like normalcy. Put

another way, in your college years you have learned something most people do not know until they are well into middle age: You know about the art and science of isolation, and how to overcome it.

Let me be even more specific about your understanding and experience of isolation. All of you know about isolation from your time wearing masks. You know the isolation from one another's physical presence because you have learned in an online format where you used to learn in the presence of one other's company. Some of you know the loneliness of sitting in a car in a parking lot to join an online class. Some of you know intense physical isolation because you tested positive and went into what was called "quarantine and isolation" to protect the rest of the community.

And then there was the even more difficult kind of isolation–separation from loved ones who were going through things that you could not help with because you could not get to them. The isolation from friends who decided to study remotely but who had previously been your support system when you were physically together. The isolation from teachers and mentors, whose guidance, inspiration, and reassurance you needed to keep learning.

And then there are the most difficult forms of isolation, which many of you also know. The broken social fabric—the one that you did not even know was torn until you tried to resume relationships. The isolation of losing people without being able to touch them to say goodbye. The isolation of knowing that people have left you when you did not have the opportunity to be in their presence one more time.

Even with all these forms of separation and loneliness, the narrative of your college education is the story of your victory over isolation. We saw that triumph in so many ways. We saw it when you were making videos to help everyone come to terms with the protocols that separated us. We saw it in your reaching out to people who you thought may not have anyone else to connect with in virtual friend groups. We saw it in your insistence that we create spontaneous meeting opportunities at the college because, in the most intense semesters of the pandemic, that is what you missed the most. We saw it in your intentional creation of new spaces where people could meet—to have a meal together in Ross Dining Hall, or meditate together on campus, or to explore new trails outdoors. We saw it in the ways that you spoke to us about not just *representing* community, but about *building* community.

Everything that you do in your future life will be influenced by the fact that you learned this wisdom at such an early age. First and foremost, you learned to tell the difference between isolation and solitude. Isolation is the lack of community, a deep fraying of the social bond that moves us into a kind of lonely despair. Solitude, on the other hand, is the ground of community. It is being alone, but with the knowledge that the community is all around us, and inside our hearts and minds as we move forward. And meaningful solitude allows us to be in community with each other in new and different and creative ways. As essayist and poet May Sarton thinks about it, isolation is despair. Solitude is creative and hopeful.

Second, you also learned that community involves active building, not just passive being. It involves reaching out, not just staying with, even in a world which often feels overwhelming. May Sarton goes on to write about how to maintain hope in an overwhelming world:

I am more and more convinced that in the life of civilizations as in the lives of individuals too much matter that cannot be digested, too much experience that has not been imagined and probed and understood, ends in total rejection of everything — ends in anomie. The structures break down and there is nothing to "hold onto." …. Hatred rather than love dominates. How does one handle it? The greatest danger, as I see it in myself, is the danger of withdrawal into private worlds. We have to keep the channels in ourselves open to pain. At the same time it is essential that true joys be experienced, that the sunrise not leave us unmoved, for civilization depends on the true joys, all those that have nothing to do with money or affluence — nature, the arts, human love. Maybe that is why the pandas in the London Zoo brought me back to poetry for the first time in two years.

For Sarton, true and hopeful community is being open to pain, the ability to be moved, and the ability to connect beyond loneliness. To keep the channels open, in solitude and with others.

The world you are graduating into requires the energy of a twenty-two-year-old, and the wisdom of a seventy-year-old. I would argue that as Middlebury graduates you have both and can meet the challenges of that world. Here is my charge to you: Take your pandemic wisdom about overcoming isolation and apply it everywhere.

Let us take two of the most immediate challenges of our world—ones that surround us on an hourly basis and we cannot ignore and ones that are pillars of learning at Middlebury. The first is that of climate change. Any possibility of reducing our carbon emissions and keeping the global

temperature rise under 1.5 degrees demands science, social science, humanities, languages, and arts, all at once to address it. Many Middlebury students—indeed, many of you—already go into environmental fields in larger percentage than many other colleges. That is because you already know what it is like to solve problems in community, on a local scale.

That is what Energy2028 is all about. It took moving beyond isolation and having the courage to be with each other, to stay with each other, and create new forms of energy, solar, renewable gas, and to maintain the woodchip burning facility that got us to carbon neutrality in 2016. It took being in meetings—many of them!—with people who disagreed with you. It took listening and changing and re-calculating. And you found a way to do it and to continue it even in the isolation of COVID.

You know we cannot afford to withdraw into our private worlds to find a way forward. Take your knowledge about moving beyond isolation and building community and apply it to the climate change challenges in your next world beyond Middlebury. Create climate solutions wherever you are by remaining in relationship with people, including all voices and getting input from those most affected. Listen to what they need as we tackle this global problem, one local solution at a time. By keeping channels open, you create hope.

The same goes for the second, ubiquitous challenge of our immediate world: artificial intelligence. In the last six months ChatGPT and many other forms of AI have emerged as a major topic for all of us not only in higher education, but also in the workplace. Any skill that you develop in artificial intelligence, or the detection of the use of artificial intelligence, or the coding that could improve artificial intelligence, will be replaced the week after it is announced. For many people in the world of education, the rate of change is so great that they have come to believe that the most important thing for any young person to have is discernment, an ethical grounding when it comes to its use. Or, as a recent computer science graduate from one of the top universities in the world recently observed, “So much of the basic computational skills are now so readily accessible in AI that I wonder if a philosophy degree might have been just as useful as knowing how to code.”

Artificial intelligence can free us to do our most creative work. It can also deprive us of the opportunity to be our best, most human selves. Both things are true. And your Middlebury experience of learning in community will give you the wisdom to know how to tell the difference. Explore it so you can understand its appropriate and inappropriate uses. If you see artificial intelligence being used in a way that isolates people, we are counting on you to have the wisdom

to redirect that use toward the force of the common good. If you see artificial intelligence replacing critical thinking, we are counting on you to have the wisdom to redirect it so that it becomes a guide and a help rather than a substitution for human creativity and community.

Beginning tomorrow and in the months and years ahead, you will see forms of this dilemma in your new workplaces, your new graduate schools, your new internships—wherever your responsibilities take you. In the AI arms race of who can produce the best open-source AI, or the fastest detection and counter-detection software, or the effort to better understand its benefits and dangers, remember to embody the human. Remember what it took to overcome isolation and use those tools to create a humane and visionary use of artificial intelligence—one that expands human capacity rather than replaces or destroys it.

You were once in isolation from each other. You are no longer. Now you are, in the words of poet Lucille Clifton, “the bridge between starshine and clay,” between the skies around you and the earth that has embraced you, between the world of your dreams and the realities on the ground that shape how you live those dreams. Clifton was writing about the experience of being a Black woman in America, and has much to teach us about becoming and remaining human in a world where, as she puts it, “there was no model,” and “with one hand holding tight the other hand,” she had “nothing to see to be” except herself. The world you are about to enter offers very few models. So, with one hand holding tight the other hand, you must have the courage to be yourself.

Middlebury graduates: You are no longer in isolation. You have already refused to withdraw into your private worlds. Go now and use your wisdom to be that bridge between starshine and clay, with deep community within and around you, open to pain and joy.

Congratulations. We send you out now, and will welcome you home in the future, with admiration and love.

Office of the President
Old Chapel
9 Old Chapel Road
Middlebury College
Middlebury, VT 05753
802-443-5400
president@middlebury.edu